

**“Social Media and Law Enforcement – no cost crime control in
America”**

Unlimited Resources Available to Law Enforcement

by

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

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Unlimited Resources Available to Law Enforcement

What if I could offer you unlimited resources at no cost to help curtail crime in your jurisdiction? Just think about this for a minute, how many phones are capable of receiving video or text in your city or county right now? How many people are sitting in front of their computers? Using these readily-available tools, your agency could expand exponentially immediately after a crime! The philosophy is to get them to be able to help you.

For quite some time, the community has had the capability to monitor and obtain criminal information by the mere possession of a police scanner. Criminal information is available at a touch of a button with this device. When police agencies are dispatched to calls for service, whether they are shootings in progress or your everyday run-of-the-mill calls, the public can hear all “in progress” criminal activity via scanner. Don’t have a police scanner? That’s ok; there is an app for that! Now for mere ninety-nine cents, any police agency’s police scanner radio traffic can be downloaded so members of the community receive the same information with which the police are provided at the time of the incident. How easy (or not) will it be for law enforcement to adapt?

This type of technology currently exists, but changing the culture of the police organization and allowing this type of evidence to be viewed immediately to the community is difficult because of the mindset of the manner an investigation is traditionally investigated by law enforcement. Traditionally, when law enforcement is

looking for a wanted subject a press release is generated to a predetermined media base. If there was an egregious crime, law enforcement might reach out to television news to request help or to disseminate information about a crime, event, or emergency management concern. (Vallez 2010).

Impact of Social Media

Surveillance is virtually everywhere. The police investigator may be able to capture a potential witness or suspect on surveillance. Instead of keeping the information for the use of police only, what if the investigator could upload the video and send it out instantaneously to the community? People who were driving past a moment ago could see the video and report possible witnesses or suspects to the crime. People might recognize the suspect or witness and call in with information on how to contact that person. A social media outlet could be used for such a video.

One of the many ways technology has impacted law enforcement now and will in the future is with social media networking. It has exploded onto the scene because people want to know. Large metropolitan police agencies across the United States are already using the social media outlets to apprehend suspects. Popular websites such as Twitter answer the question “what are you doing?” specifically meaning ... “What are you doing this instant?” According to Homeland News Security Newswires, Twitter, Facebook and similar community resources have netted results for the police. Two recent instances are noteworthy:

- The Upper Allen PA Township Police Department followed the lead of nearby cities in Pennsylvania and started using various social-networking tools like

Facebook and Twitter to not only communicate with local residents, but also track down criminals and missing persons.

- After a robbery occurred in Lower Paxton Township, Pennsylvania, the police posted a photo of the suspected robber online and within minutes the police were able to track him down. “Within 10 minutes, somebody had called and identified the guy,” said Detective Sergeant David Hodges. Sergeant Hodges says that social networking sites have also been a great asset in tracking down wanted criminals. “People have called me and said, ‘Hey, I just found this person on Facebook and he has an address that’s listed and he’s going to school in Colorado,’ ” he said.

In the future, why not “Twitter” about a bank robbery? If a description or video was obtained from the bank and information was provided to the community, would the criminal investigation be in jeopardy?

Twitter for Crime Control

According to the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC), “Police departments use the sites to rapidly communicate directly to citizens, providing such information as suspect descriptions, crime alerts, road closings, missing child and person alerts, dangerous weather conditions and traffic accidents. People voluntarily reveal details of their lives on social networking sites, which can serve law enforcement well. Sites such as Facebook and MySpace can be used by law enforcement to obtain information about suspects, for example, involvement in gang activity”. This statement strongly infers we can do much more to capitalize on what social media offers in terms of crime control and the investigation of incidents. NLECTC continues by

saying “Photos or videos of suspects can be posted as well. Sites such as You-Tube are being used to foster police recruitment. Citizen subscribers to sites such as Twitter and Nixle can automatically receive police department information via text message, e-mail or by logging on to those sites”. They also reported that social media such as Twitter generates a user base quickly, and that such media can interface with police-specific sites such as Nixle quite easily. One agency has already begun using Twitter for more than just messaging; in fact, it is now a part of the department’s crime fighting arsenal.

Modesto PD and Twitter

The Modesto Police Department’s Twitter site has numerous followers. Twitter was helpful in communicating with the citizens during an incident. Recently, the Department pursued a vehicle containing suspects in a double homicide. The armed suspects abandoned the vehicle and fled on foot. During the subsequent manhunt in a residential neighborhood, Twitter was used to keep citizens updated from the initial search through the time when arrests were made and the police perimeter was lifted. “We were dealing with a serious situation, the public was in danger and we needed them to have information. It was an avenue through which at least some people were getting the information,” stated Public Information Officer Brian Findlen, who noted “there is no maintenance on our end. It’s an easy means to distribute information from our patrol cars or laptop computers. We can put information out with no delay, with no middleman at any cost”.

Like some others, Modesto is on the cutting edge of utilizing social media as a means of communication, and is one of the larger agencies to take that first step of implementing social media as an interactive tool. As reported in the Modesto Bee

newspaper on February 6th, 2011 the Department's Twitter page now has about 3,200 followers who receive updates on evolving major incidents and links to news releases about investigations. "It's definitely another communication tool," said Modesto Police spokesman Sgt. Rick Armendariz. "It's providing the public real-time information." Public information officers typically provide information to news outlets that in turn inform the public. But now, Armendariz can send a tweet, instantly communicating with the public himself. For example, the Police Department tweeted a suspect's description shortly after a bank robbery last month in west Modesto. He said Twitter helps the department "to have more eyes on the street." Tweets, however, can also hamper police work as news outlets and novice scanner listeners can send alerts with unverified details of rapidly changing incidents. Although some officials have concerns, they also recognize that as the popularity of this social networking site continues to grow, so will their capacity to deliver instant news.

Modesto's Twitter page was especially useful in the two-week search for 4-year-old Juliani Cardenas. News media constantly tweeted information about the case they had received from the Detectives. They provided information regarding the missing child, which is normally reserved for an Amber Alert. Law Enforcement provided the news media with up to the minute coverage on the investigation. In turn, the public was kept informed about the abduction to the recovery of the boy's body from the Delta-Mendota Canal. This ongoing update of information allowed citizens to stay informed, be alert to possible information relevant to the case, and lightened the burden for support personnel by providing the information to the public in mass, eliminating the need for them to call.

In an age of instant information and a 24-hour news cycle, our community partnerships of the future will demand the police provide both the media and residents with the information necessary to keep their community safe. Because of the rapid expansion of social media, the philosophy of law enforcement agencies may need to be modified to include the need for criminal information to be circulated immediately. This type of information provided to the public is not meant to provide “gory crime scenes and bodies”, but as a venue to provide information to elicit potential leads in a criminal case as well as enhance the bonds between the police and their populace.

Michael Vallez, a retired police officer, social media strategist and Internet Marketing journeyman states Police Departments of the future may have to include social media and the technology into their communications policies and standard operating procedures. He emphasized that law enforcement needs to embrace social media and investigate what benefits they can realize. (Vallez 2009) an important aspect of Vallez’ perspective is the community of the future will not request, but will demand more criminal information instantaneously. Social media is unfolding at a pace where law enforcement may be handicapped if they do not plan to adapt social media in the future. Turning a blind eye to social media will eventually result in agencies being less effective than they may wish to be, and also less accessible to the public who will expect to see them present in cyberspace. Of course, the news is not all bad.

Positive impacts of Social Media

Law enforcement leaders may question the utilization of social media technologies to disseminate criminal information. Even if there is a reluctance, there is an

emerging body of evidence to show its advantages. For instance, in Stanislaus County CA, Deputy Luke Schwartz (assigned to the agency's public information unit) used Twitter in December to notify residents of an incident in one of their communities. After a botched home-invasion robbery in a rural area, two of five suspects were missing. Schwartz sent tweets to keep people away from where the search was taking place. The targets of the home invasion shot the would-be robbers. Two of the men were later found on the Oakdale-Waterford Highway in Waterford. One was fatally shot and the other was taken to a hospital with several gunshot wounds. Along with utilizing social media to alert the community, Sheriff's deputies used a helicopter and dogs in their search as they rounded up the three other suspects. "It's a valuable tool that allows us to get our message out," Schwartz said. "You're going to see a lot more law enforcement agencies get on board with social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook." (Law Enforcement News, 2011).

Recommendations

Various researchers are likely to raise questions about the impact Social Media will have on Law Enforcement investigations. Many researchers cite that law enforcement will need to be trained in the utilization of Social Media and develop practices and protocols for investigating crimes. The community will need to grasp an understanding of how law enforcement will operate social media and how that will impact criminal investigations. If such Social Media issues are addressed early with the business community, local law enforcement may have the opportunity to lower the crime rate even further. This law enforcement Social Media strategy will demonstrate those

concerns about the reduction of crime and apprehension of criminals is at the forefront of the police priorities.

Law enforcement wants to engage the community in the prevention of crime and the apprehension of criminals by employing futuristic law enforcement strategies. This means educating the public on the strategy law enforcement will undertake when utilizing social media. The community and businesses will need to have a comfort level with law enforcement. They need to realize that the video or information they are providing regarding the suspects will be disseminated to the rest of the community instantaneously. They need to understand that this information being disseminated could assist in locating the suspects, locating a lost child, or providing information on how to seek shelter and evacuation routes in the event of a disaster. Lon S. Cohen a freelance writer and the Director of Communications at @Assignee reported Twitter has plenty of uses for individuals and companies. Law enforcement also uses the service to communicate with the public. Cohen reported Law Enforcement agencies have found unique ways to incorporate Twitter into their police tactics. “The LAPD used Twitter to monitor crowds during the Michael Jackson funeral.” The Boston Police have been using Twitter to alert followers of evolving situations in real time.

Conclusion

Social media has flooded law enforcement at a pace that has unfolded so rapidly, law enforcement is still in the adoption stages of such technology. However, the need is greater than ever to harness this type of technology for the benefit of society and law enforcement. As law enforcement officials, it is time we embrace all components of

social media and circulate vital criminal information to the community in a valiant effort to bring justice to those involved.

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